
HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD STAFF REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION

Property Address: **513 U Street NW**
Landmark/District: **LeDroit Park Historic District**
ANC: **1B**

Meeting Date: **May 23, 2013**
H.P.A. Number: **#13-109**
Staff Reviewer: **Brendan Meyer**

(X) Agenda
() Consent Calendar
() Denial Calendar
(X) Concept Review
(X) Alteration
() New Construction
() Demolition
() Subdivision

The applicant, owners Quiton and Ritu Cooper, seek concept review for a partial third floor addition and penthouse, and other exterior alterations, to a two-story rowhouse at 513 U Street NW in the LeDroit Park Historic District. Plans were prepared by ABD, Inc.



Figure 1. 513 U Street NW

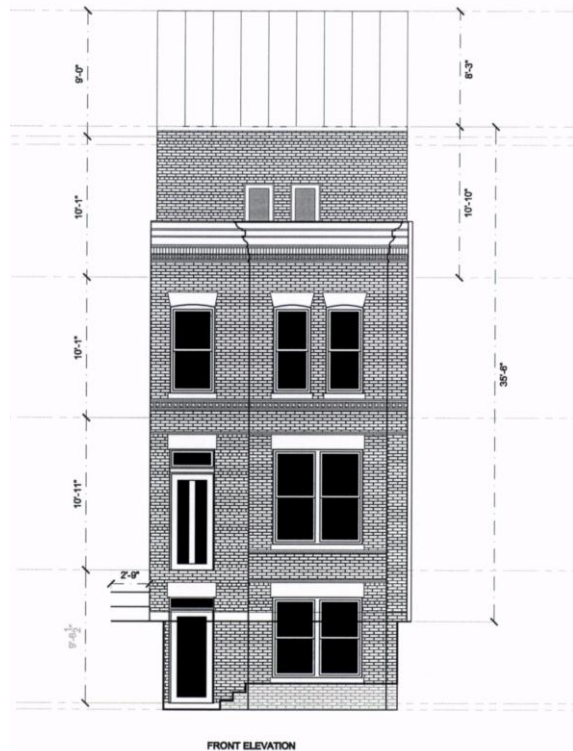


Figure 2. Proposed third floor addition and new basement entrance

Property Description and Context

513 U Street is a two-story brick rowhouse constructed in 1891. Measuring 18 feet wide and 45 feet deep, its facade has a shallow projecting bay capped by a flat roof. While detached on both sides, it is only fenestrated on the west side wall. Based on its date of construction, architectural character and integrity, it is contributing to the character of the historic district.

The north side of U Street is uniformly two stories in character and is a mix of historic and modern two-story rowhouses. The modern rowhouses built to the west of 513 U Street were approved by the

Board before 2001 and are excellent examples of how contemporary buildings can achieve compatibility in a historic district by adapting their design to the size and ornament of the surrounding streetscape.

Proposal

The applicant proposes to maintain the rowhouse as a single family dwelling and add a rear, third floor and penthouse addition. The front yard is proposed for excavation to create a new basement entrance and areaway.

Taken together, the additions would require the demolition of the rear elevation and most of the roof. The additions would extend the rear of the house an additional 36 feet for a total depth of 81 feet and rise to a height of 33 feet at the rear. The new rear elevation would come within 7 feet of the rear property line and house a garage at grade. All sides of the addition would be brick; the north and west walls would be fenestrated with double hung windows.

At the front, the new third floor would be setback 15 feet from the front façade and would stand 7 feet taller than the existing front façade. A penthouse on top of the third floor would house a stair to provide access for a roof deck and mechanical equipment. The penthouse would be the full width of the building and have a sloped roof parallel to the run of stairs.

The front alterations are concentrated at a new basement entrance to be inserted under the existing front door. The much-altered existing stairs would be demolished and replaced with a new metal stair. About two thirds of the 150 square foot front yard not already occupied by stairs and walks would be excavated to provide new stairs down to the new basement entrance and a 60 square foot areaway for two new full size basement windows in the front projection.

Evaluation

The concept design has numerous deficiencies that make the proposed additions and alterations incompatible with the character of the historic district. Most significantly, the size of the additions, taken as a whole, is too large to fit on this relatively small rowhouse without resulting in substantially visible and incompatible changes to the roof of the house, roofline of the entire block, and the size and massing of the house in general. The detached condition of 513 U Street exposes the house to views not typical of a mid-block rowhouse. A flag test was erected by the applicant and inspected by staff.¹ While the addition was shown to not be visible from directly across the house, moving only a few feet in either direction along U Street brought the flag test quickly into view along the unattached sides of the house (Fig. 3).

The Board has regularly found rooftop additions that are substantially visible and that would alter character defining features like size, roofline and massing to be incompatible on small-scale contributing historic buildings. The Board has taken this position even when the third floor addition is designed to precisely replicate a historic form or style (see 1328 10th Street NW, HPA #13-102, January 2013).

An alternate, though smaller addition, holds the possibility of being compatible with the historic district. A three-story rear addition that does not overlap on top of the existing house would have an

¹ Street view photo shows only the proposed third floor roofline. For safety, the test for the penthouse was erected and held up by hand only briefly, but long enough for Staff to see that the penthouse would increase the visibility of the addition (Fig. 4).

increased setback of 45 feet. This would reduce the amount of demolition to the historic building and reduce the visibility from U Street of any addition. It would only be seen through the narrow views along the sides of house and therefore could result in only insubstantial, and even screened, visibility. The possibility of this alternative approach being compatible would improve by eliminating the roof deck from the program.

The front basement alteration requires further study in order to reduce its size and impact on the small yard of the house. The existing conditions of 513 U Street match the conditions which the *Preservation and Design Guidelines for Basement Entrances (2011)* warn may not be possible where, "...the first floor is close to grade, where the building is close to the sidewalk, or where the basement stair would be exposed at eye level from the sidewalk. In such instances, the extent of excavation may alter the relationship of the building to grade, overwhelm the site, or become such a prominent element that it detracts from the property's character" (Section 3.3). All of those conditions are present at 513 U Street. The impact of the alteration would be improved if the basement windows were reduced to smaller awning-type windows that did not go below grade or have an areaway (the door would provide egress). That still would not solve the difficult challenge of inserting a run of stairs long enough to provide access to a new basement entrance without becoming the dominant feature of the front of the building.



Figure 3. Flag test for third floor. Penthouse flag not erected.



Figure 4. Third floor and penthouse flags.

Recommendation

The HPO recommends that the Board find the concept for a third floor and penthouse addition on top of 513 U Street NW incompatible with the character of the LeDroit Park Historic District.